Developing academic writing skills as part of graduate attributes in undergraduate curricula

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Abstract

The development of graduate attributes in higher education is enjoying much attention worldwide. Employers consistently rank communication skills, in particular writing ability, among the most important skills for graduates to possess. The inclusion and development of graduate attributes in undergraduate curricula have received little attention. In South Africa, the National Qualifications Framework provides level descriptors for the inclusion of generic graduate attributes at different educational levels in curricula. Level descriptors for academic writing are rather vague, and have not been explicitly addressed. We propose in this article a possible process framework for the integration of the development of academic writing skills into an undergraduate four year degree in higher education. The vague writing level descriptors provided by South African National Qualifications Framework have been rewritten more specifically. Implementing these remodelled level descriptors for writing will facilitate the integration of academic writing skills into a four year bachelor's degree.

INTRODUCTION

Worldwide, increasing value is placed upon the development of graduate attributes in higher education (Smith and Bath 2006, 259; Barrie 2007, 439). In South Africa, 'there is pressure on higher education from both government and employers to produce graduates who are employable in the sense that they have the attributes, capabilities and dispositions to work successfully' (Griesel and Parker 2009, 1).

Traditionally, in higher education, the development of discipline specific knowledge and skills, has been emphasised, while skills addressing intellectual and social attributes have not been focused upon, and usually taught implicitly and informally (Bath et al. 2004, 315; Jones 2009, 176). However, a review of the literature indicates that there is general agreement that there should be a balance between the body of knowledge that forms the core curriculum of traditional higher education and the development of values skills.

A recent study in South Africa by Griesel and Parker (2009) confirmed that knowledge; skills, competencies and values of new graduates are a necessary pre-condition for graduate employability, which currently do not meet the expectations of South African employers. Employers consistently rank communication skills, in particular writing ability, among the most important skills for graduates to possess (Bacon et al. 2004, 217). However, the task of improving writing skills, especially punctuation, grammar, and word choice in higher education, may require considerable effort on the part of the lecturer (Bacon and Anderson 2004, 443).

Two broad categories of graduate skills are recognised, namely, disciplinary specific skills and generic skills. Generic skills subsume terms such as 'key skills', 'general attributes', 'basic skills', 'key competences', 'transferable skills' and the terms 'employability skills' and 'soft skills' (Barrie 2006, 217; Hager and Holland 2006, 2). The contemporary focus of generic skills in higher education has also been recognised by the university sector, where they are often called 'graduate attributes' or 'graduate qualities' (Hager and Holland 2006, 2). These attributes are viewed progressively more significant to obtain in all walks of life, especially in preparation for the world of work, and cluster around key human skills, such as teamwork, communication and problem solving (Hager and Holland 2006, 2).

Chapman (2004) made four arguments supporting the adoption of graduate attributes. Firstly, any authentic university's Strategic Plan should promulgate the importance of graduate success after completing their studies when engaging in the world of work. 'Employability of a graduate is the propensity of the graduate to exhibit attributes that employers anticipate will be necessary for the future effective functioning of their organisation' (Harvey 1999). The second argument originates from the view that a university has the responsibility to provide graduates with an ability to operate in the community. Thirdly, students are prepared for the world of work during their undergraduate studies. Because knowledge is constantly changing, students need to have the skills to adapt to such changes, thus develop the skill of lifelong learning. The fourth argument relates to the expectation of employers that graduate attributes are a pre-condition for a graduate's employability.

The implementation of the Higher Education Qualification Framework (HEQF) in South Africa brought with it many transformational implications across the whole Higher Education spectrum in South Africa (SAQA 2010). Earlier conceptions that relied upon lists of 'key generic skills' have given way to more distinctive approaches emphasising practical skills, knowledge, personal attributes and metacognition (Griesel and Parker 2009, 1). Although clearly stipulated as a directive, the inclusion and development of graduate attributes in undergraduate curricula have received little attention. Implementation around the world has been inconsistent (Barrie 2006, 218). Also, because education is viewed as a lifelong learning experience, the needs and expectations for graduates should also receive consideration (Gonczi 2006, 106; Smith and Bath 2006, 259).

Guidelines demonstrating particular methods for developing such attributes are often unclear and lack specifications (Smith and Bath 2006, 262). In this article

we propose a possible framework for the development and integration of the communication attribute, specifically the art of writing, into an undergraduate four year degree in higher education.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The development of generic graduate attributes through education worldwide has resulted from three major trends (Cummings 1998):

- the increasingly popular perspective that education is a lifelong process;
- a greater focus on the direct relationship between education and training and the employment of graduates; and
- the development of outcome measures of education and training which in universities has arisen out of the quality improvement movement and its focus on measurable outcomes as a means of judging the efficacy of the education process.

The communication graduate attributes of reading and writing are not only a means to cope scholastically, but are also imperative for graduates to survive in the world of work and in modern society (Lessing and Mahabeer 2007, 139). Even though reading is regarded as the most basic communication skill in any discipline, it is the skill of writing that supports and fosters academic performance (Shaw 1999, 156). The importance of the ability to write effectively has been recognised by numerous authors who have highlighted the fact that students find it difficult to write, regardless of the efforts by educators to counteract the problem (Bridgeman and Carlson 1984; Cumming 2002; Zhu and Flaitz 2005). Employers in South Africa rank the 'ability to find and access information', grouped with 'written communication skills' and the 'ability to use information' as the most important graduate attributes (Griesel and Parker 2009, 10).

Many academics have claimed that students write poorly and that their literacy standards are diminishing (Lea and Street 1998, 157). The fundamental element of proficient reading and writing is adequate language use (Matlin 2002, 284), which is closely related to a person's experience and general knowledge (Lessing and Mahabeer 2007, 139). For many learners in South Africa, English is not their mother tongue, exacerbating the problem of poor writing skills (Lessing and Mahabeer 2007, 139). Many university lecturers also perceive that the development of generic graduate attributes is not their responsibility and should be taught in a tacked on course (Gash and Reardon 1998; Bath et al. 2004).

Even though many authors have recognised the need for the integration of the development of writing skills in curricula, it has not been well integrated into core curricula (Lavelle 2003, 87). Because generic graduate attributes are not seriously addressed in higher education, serious thought should be given to the structure and delivery to accommodate the development of these skills (Chadha and Nicholls 2006, 116). Chadha and Nicholls (2006) described three approaches to the development

of generic graduate attributes in undergraduate training: 'embedding', 'integrating' and 'bolting-on' skills development. Embedding the development of generic skills within courses means that no reference is made to skills development, while in the integrated approach skills are developed in parallel with the core discipline and the same amount of emphasis is placed on the development of generic skills as disciplinary skills. In the bolt-on approach skills are developed independently of the core curriculum. The embedded approach is viewed as the most advantageous, because learners develop a broad range of skills (Chadha and Nicholls 2006, 117).

Stephenson in 1992, and Clanchy and Ballard in 1995 argued strongly against the separation of generic skills from specialist knowledge, stating that generic skills can only be developed within specific contexts (Jones 2009, 176). Although authors support the embedded approach to the development of generic skills, there exists a place for the bolt-on type of courses that develop language and writing proficiency skills. For example, the English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programme, offered at American Universities, offers a bolt-on programme to assist students of English as a Second Language (ESL) in developing the kind of English proficiency that will lead to success in their academic endeavours (Zhu and Flaitz 2005). With many South African students having English as a second language, often as a third language, the bolt-on option has could have a noteworthy place in the higher education landscape.

The South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) has provided level descriptors for Levels One to Ten of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) to ensure coherence across learning in the allocation of qualifications to particular levels, and to benchmark international comparability of qualifications (SAQA 2010). For all levels one descriptor describes the expected learning achievements for communication, which includes writing. The Level Four descriptors relate to grade 12, while Level Five relates to first year post Grade 12, Level Six to second year post Grade 12, Level Seven to third year post Grade 12 and Level Eight to fourth year post Grade 12. This framework relates to the structure of the observed learning outcome (SOLO) described by Biggs and Collins (1982), in which each higher level the structural complexity of the expected student learning achievements increases in a qualitative (detail becomes more integrated) and quantitative (amount detail increases) manner. These learning achievements are equivalent to learning objectives that specify the 'end point' of a student's learning (Chapman 2004, 8).

DEVELOPING WRITING SKILLS IN UNDERGRADUATE STUDIES

Curriculum mapping of a learning programme

Although SAQA specifies that students should have an ability to communicate and present information reliably and accurately in writing after completing Grade 12, a large cohort of students entering tertiary education lack these basic skills (Kotze 2007). This impasse has prompted many tertiary institutions to design bridging courses, of which many impart basic writing skills. In South Africa these bolted-on

writing courses could be of great value in higher education, because of the large numbers of students who do not present English as a first language when entering higher education. The participation in a bolted-on course should be accompanied by a prior skills test, where those students lacking the required skills will have to enrol in a basic skills development course, after which they can continue with the learning programme for which they have registered.

Many universities are mapping generic graduate attributes against existing curricula to identify where specific skills are being developed and where there are gaps in curricula (Barrie 2007, 455). Some universities have taken highly structured approaches to mapping graduate attributes across curricula, to ensure that these attributes can be readily seen across an entire learning programme.

Reviewing a learning programme for the development of generic graduate attributes is reasonably straightforward when all students take all modules/units and when it is being reviewed for a particular generic graduate attribute. It becomes more complex when students have electives from which they can select modules/units and more than one graduate attribute is being integrated (Chapman 2004, 8). Before a curriculum of a learning programme can be restructured to include the development of, for instance writing skills, a comprehensive curriculum mapping analysis should be undertaken (Table 1).

Table 1: Summary of the steps to follow when mapping a curriculum (based on Chapman 2004, 8)

Steps	Description of mapping process
Step 1	Refine generic graduate attributes for each level (years one to four in the case of a four year bachelor's degree) of a learning programme • Use SAQA level descriptor for communication and refine for writing skills for each level.
Step 2	Map graduate attributes for each module/unit at all four levels • Map writing skills for all modules/units • Identify writing skills taught/assessed implicitly • Identify writing skills taught/assessed explicitly • Combine module/unit information into a summary or map for all modules/units
Step 3	Analyse the summary or map for all modules/units of the learning programme • Identify writing skills gaps and overlaps for all modules/units • Identify existing writing skills teaching and assessment strategies • Develop additional writing skills teaching and assessment strategies • Determine writing skills changes to assessment criteria
Step 4	Implement changes to the curriculum of the learning programme
Step 5	Document explicitly where necessary, within modules/units (e.g. learning objectives and assessment criteria), in learning programme descriptions
Step 6	Plan a cycle of review and evaluation

A learning programme should be described in terms of its aims and objectives, assessment and, teaching and learning activities. It is essential that students are

provided with explicit, unambiguous and detailed guidelines, particularly in the first year of study. Fewer instructions will be needed in subsequent years, because of the experience students gained during the first year. Different disciplines have distinctly different formats for different writing assignments such as reports, which require clear guidelines so that students can adjust to each situation. It is further important that students understand what is expected from each writing assignment and what the assessment criteria are, as summarised in Figure 1.

Aims and objectives	Assessment	Teaching and learning activities
The statement to aims and objectives includes reference to the specific graduate attribute (for example, writing skill) being developed through the module/unit.	Assessment tasks are based directly around the objectives so that students who are successful in the assessment have met the module/unit objectives.	Supporting the students to achieve the assessment determines the teaching and learning activities used. Typically different methods will be used in during the delivery of the module/unit.

Figure 1: Model for describing a learning programme (based on Chapman 2004, 8)

Developing learning objectives

The learning objectives of each module/unit as well as for the entire learning programme are statements of what is expected of the student at the end of their learning experience, referred to by SAQA as learning achievements. Since SAQA has developed level descriptors providing learning objectives for generic graduate attributes for all years of study, it has now become imperative for universities to focus on the development of these generic graduate attributes in learning programmes. The incorporation of generic graduate attributes into learning programmes will require a change of attitudes and conscientious efforts by lecturers (Cummings 1998). In terms of writing skills, lecturers need to be clear about what learners should achieve during their studies by setting realistic goals (Shaw 1999, 153). It is important to balance the reading and writing times and assignments with the level of study, while taking into account the specific SAQA level descriptors.

The SAQA communication level descriptor clusters expected writing achievements together with all other communication skills, such as reading and verbal communication, therefore it is necessary to segregate out the elements that pertain specifically to expected writing achievements and map them to the different years of a four year qualification as described in step one of the curriculum mapping process (Table 2). Based upon these proposed separated out expected writing learning objectives, it is now possible to formulate specific teaching and learning activities that could be integrated into undergraduate curricula in higher education following the embedded approach (Chadha and Nicholls 2006, 117). Therefore, as suggested in Step 3 of the curriculum mapping process the existing curriculum is modified to

include shortfalls and eliminating overlaps and restructured in terms aims, objectives and assessment.

Table 2: SAQA communication level descriptor on Level Five to Eight and separated out expected writing learning objectives

Level	Expected learning objectives for communication	Expected learning objectives for communication in terms of writing
5	Producing and communicating information, in respect of which a learner is able to • Demonstrate an ability to communicateinformationreliably, accuratelyand coherently using conversations appropriate to the context (field of study), either in writing, verbally or in practical demonstration, including an understanding of and respect forconventions around intellectual property, copyright and plagiarism.	Produce and communicate information in respect of which a learner is able to demonstrate an ability to: • Write reliably, accurately and coherently in field of study • Understand and respect conventions around intellectual property, copyright and plagiarism
6	Producing and communicating information, in respect of which a learner is able to demonstrate an ability to • Present and communicate complex information reliably and coherently using appropriate academic and professional or occupational conventions, formats and technologies for a given context.	Produce and communicate information in respect of which a learner is able to demonstrate an ability to: • Write complex information reliably and coherently using appropriate academic and professional or occupational conventions (rules and principles in field of study and future world of work), formats (styles of documents specified for field of study and future world of work) and technologies (software) for a given context (in a given field of study).
7	Producing and communicating information, in respect of which a learner is able to demonstrate an ability to • Develop (present) and communicate his or her ideas and opinions in well-formed arguments, using appropriate academic, professional, or occupations discourse	Produce and communicate information in respect of which a learner is able to demonstrate an ability to: • Write his or her ideas and opinions in well-formed arguments, using appropriate academic, professional, or occupations discourse
8	Producing and communicating information, in respect of which a learner is able to demonstrate an ability to • Communicateacademic, professional or occupational ideasin texts effectively to a range of audiences, offering creative insights, rigorous interpretations and solutions to problems and issues appropriate to the context	Produce and communicate information in respect of which a learner is able to demonstrate an ability to: • Write academic and professional or occupational ideasin texts effectively for a range of audiences, offering creative insights, rigorous interpretations and solutions to problems and issues appropriate to the context

When writing the objectives it is recommended to use specific and strong verbs describing a specific activity without ambiguity. Students should be clear about what is required in a particular writing assignment. When writing objectives, it can be useful to begin with the sentence with, 'At the completion of this unit you will be able to ...'.

Learning objectives for writing skills

The embedded approach to the development of generic graduate attributes uses the curriculum of the learning programme as a means to develop different skills through a range of teaching activities that help students to achieve the intended learning objectives. Teaching activities employ a range of different writing assignments that students engage to develop writing skills but also enhance a student's understanding of a course subject. For writing, the range of writing products vary among paragraphs, explanations, arguments, summaries, essays, reviews, critiques, and at higher levels of study even journals articles. Learning objectives should clearly describe what is expected so that a student will complete a writing assignment correctly. For instance, a summary should be written on a particular section, chapter about a specific theory, topic or research in a textbook. Similarly when writing an abstract, it should focus on a particular journal article. Asking students to select their own article may lead to plagiarism, rather than creativity and independence; therefore it might be wise to specify a particular article (Shaw 1999, 156).

A number of assessment criteria apply to all written assignments: clarity, accuracy, logic and reasoning, and organisation. Then there are assessment criteria for specific written assignments. For instance, for a small research report the quality lies in its unique focus, methods, analyses and findings. For the assessment of written assignments, students should be informed about what marks will be awarded for each section, therefore a clear rubric is necessary for each written assignment.

At the level of first year, the SAQA communication descriptor for writing specifies two sub learning objectives: to write reliably, accurately and coherently in field of study, and demonstrate an understating of conventions around intellectual property, copyright and plagiarism. At this level it is expected that few students have extensive training in academic writing skills, therefore some fundamental writing assignments will be called for. The following are examples of typical writing assignments that could be integrated in first year curricula:

- Write a paragraph explaining a particular concept in the field of study, including examples.
- Write a short essay, 400 to 800 words on a particular subject in the field of study.
- Write a mini review of 1 000 words on a particular subject in the field of study. Material to be reviewed, should preferably be provided.
- The introduction of argumentative skills should be started as early as possible

in a learning programme, because it is a difficult skill for students to master. For instance, students could be asked to argue why a particular method is more advantageous than another.

Besides the detailed descriptions of these teaching activities in the student's study guide, lecturers will have to provide some information on paragraph construction (topic sentence and supporting sentences), intellectual property, copyright and plagiarism, in order to satisfy the two SAQA sub learning objectives. Furthermore, for students of achieve the first year learning objectives successfully, they will need subject language and will also have to have a good understanding of instruction words. These supporting skills can be developed through, for instance, crossword puzzles, multiple questions and answers and class quizzes.

Because students find the inflexible nature of referencing tricky, the art of referencing is another skill that should be introduced as soon as possible. Essays and reviews can be used to develop this skill. Standard referencing styles, such as the Harvard, APA or any style specifically prescribed by a journal in the field of study can be used.

At the second year of study, SAQA again specifies that writing should be reliable and coherent, but now demonstrated with complex information. Professional or occupational conventions (rules and principles in field of study and future world of work), formats (styles of documents specified for field of study and future world of work) and technologies (software) should form the focus of writing assignments. The following are examples of typical writing assignments that could be integrated in second year curricula:

- Similarly to the first year assignments, essays, argumentative essays and reviews could be given at this level, perhaps longer than for the first year. Referencing at this level should strongly feature in the marking rubrics.
- Documents of particular interest to a field of study, for instance laboratory reports, field reports and legal reviews should also be used as means to develop writing skills.
- Limited word summaries should be introduced at this level. Students could be given a specific chapter, section of text and be asked to write a summary.

In the third year of study SAQA wants students to demonstrate that they are able to communicate through writing assignments his or her ideas and opinions in well-formed arguments, using appropriate academic, professional, or occupations discourse. Writing opportunities should be created in which students are specifically asked to divulge their opinions and ideas. For example, the following writing assignments could be integrated in third year curricula:

- A book review where students are asked to write two pages on the content summary (for four marks), one-and-a-half pages on strengths and weaknesses (for three marks), a half a page on the contribution to the discipline (for two

marks) and half a page on suggestions for future editions on the point (for two marks).

- There is the issue of student participation in assessment. According to Shaw (1999, 156), student participation motivates students to reflect on and, therefore, improve each other's writing skills. The challenge lies in structuring a writing assignment that will incorporate student participation into such a learning activity effectively. A text book can be used where students are asked to read sections of the book and make short summaries of the different sections. Each student can then be asked to make three slide presentations of one of the sections, which their peers will critically appraise.
- Instead of book reviews, students could be asked to write a critique of presentations by their peers on selected topics, in which they are asked to mention the highlights and omissions of a presentation.
- A debate platform is another vehicle to hone in critical appraisal skills. Is such an assignment a student's reasoning and arguments will be important when awarding marks.
- The creation of posters is another valuable method to test a student's ability to take information from the literature and present it concisely and accurately. Similarly, the skill to crystallise and reduce a large body of information can also be developed through the writing of summaries of the literature. A few journal references could be supplied to students for which they are asked to write a limited word essay with appropriate referencing.

In the final year of study, students should be challenged to write formal journal articles, which could form part of their research project, which is often part of this year of study. The format of such an article should best be according to the author's instructions of a journal in the particular field of study. If research is not part of the curriculum, students should be asked to write a review article using author's instructions of a journal that publishes review articles. Examples of other smaller exercises:

- Students can be provided with journal articles of which the reference, title and abstract have been removed. Students can now be asked to supply an appropriate title and a limited word abstract.
- Presentations of research or reviews could further be critically appraised by peers.

CONCLUSIONS

Writing is essential for the understanding of academic concepts and theories. It remains the main method of communicating knowledge by the academic community. If this skill is not well developed, an academic will never be able to function completely

and effectively in the academic sector. It is however, unrealistic to believe that after four years of study a student will have mastered academic writing in all its guises, but writing skills can be honed in with practice and will be beneficial for the rest of a student's life.

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